

Using artefacts

What is an artefact?

Any surviving object which has been used by people in the past for practical and/or aesthetic purposes is an historical artefact. A child's lunchbox of the 1980s, a 1960s mini-skirt, a slide rule of the 1950s, a nineteenth-century oil lamp and a Stone Age scraper are all historical artefacts, each illustrative of aspects of the lives of the people who made and used them. Pictures, written documents, printed books, electronic records and items in the environment are also artefacts, but these sources have to be treated in rather different ways and they will be considered in further sections below.

The role of artefacts

Historical artefacts can make a distinctive contribution to the child's historical understanding and to the development of historical skills:

- the handling and investigation of historical artefacts is by its nature activity-based and can have a strong motivating influence in the teaching and learning of history
- children who have reading or other learning difficulties can be at least as effective as their classmates in analysing and making deductions from the evidence of artefacts
- the use of artefacts as historical evidence makes an important contribution to achieving a broad and balanced understanding of history. Writing has existed for a comparatively short part of human history, and even when used it tended to be the preserve of the rich, powerful and well educated. Objects, on the other hand, have been used and owned by all classes of people and by women as much as men
- examining artefacts can help children to appreciate the ingenuity of people in the past. Because the technologies available to us today are so much more varied and sophisticated, the appliances, tools and items we make and use appear to be much 'better' than those used by people in the past. By examining historical artefacts children can appreciate that people in the past were equally creative at solving practical problems, given the constraints of the technologies available to them
- artefacts provide particularly valuable opportunities to examine instances of cause, effect, change and continuity. They will often reflect the needs, circumstances or technologies of their users, and the development of related objects over time may be traced, for example 'lamps and lights through the centuries'

Finding and choosing artefacts

The most suitable historical artefacts for use with primary children are

- sufficiently robust to be handled with care by the pupils. Often children can tell a great deal about an object by handling and feeling it. Children should be taught to care for and respect old items, and older children may find it interesting to learn about how objects deteriorate because of age and use: for example, the yellowing of newspapers, the fading of fabrics and the effects of corrosion may be readily investigated in science work
- drawn from a wide range of human activities, many of which are often unrecorded in documentary sources, for example domestic equipment, farm tools, tools used by craft workers, clothes and school equipment
- not necessarily very old. One of the most relevant and important groups of objects can be acquired from the children themselves: toys no longer used, items of clothing, mementoes, old birthday cards etc. may be used to investigate their own development.

Items may be acquired from

- the parents, grandparents and wider family circle of pupils. When family history is undertaken parents and other family members might be encouraged to show or lend old items to the children in the class
- junk shops and second-hand stalls
- retired workers who may have kept tools or items associated with their jobs
- some local museums that may be able to lend some items or demonstrate them to the children.

A school might decide to collect such items over the years to create a history collection, kit or small museum which would be available to all classes in the school. If objects are collected it is important to obtain and record as much information as possible about the origins of the exhibits as this will be valuable in future years.

While objects from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries may be obtained relatively easily, small objects from earlier periods are rarer. Their value and condition may make them unsuitable for use in the classroom. Modern replicas of some domestic items, for example candle holders, weights and balances, wooden toys and Stone Age lamps, are sold in museum shops and, if made using authentic techniques, these can be valuable in the classroom.

Exemplar 11

Investigating an object

third and fourth classes

Introduction

This approach provides children with a framework which could be used with almost any historical artefact. It is a good idea to use the steps in this technique with contemporary objects before applying them to objects from the past.

Ideally this work should be done in small groups, each one investigating a single object. The activity might be used as part of a study of a particular period or aspect of life in the past. If so, children may come to the examination with some contextual knowledge which may help them to evaluate and investigate the object. Alternatively, the activity might be used to introduce a topic, since children's questions raised during the examination will stimulate further research.

Investigating an object

- *look at the object but don't guess what it is*
- *examine the object closely*
 - handle and feel it*
 - draw it*
 - think about its ...*
 - ...physical features, construction*
 - ...function, design*
- *draw conclusions about the people who made and used it*
- *investigate further*

Step 1 Presenting the object

This example is based on a small hand-held candle snuffer. When presented with such an object, many children will guess what it is. Most writers agree that this should be discouraged, as once a guess is made children will not readily consider other possibilities and will not investigate the object with the rigour needed.

Step 2 Examining the object

Close observation and systematic examination are the keys to making artefacts speak to us about the past. Handling, feeling and drawing the snuffer (perhaps from a number of angles) would help children to become familiar with its features. When drawing, children should be encouraged to record marks, lines and other features as accurately as they can. Labels might be added to the drawings to note interesting features.

Children should be encouraged to examine objects systematically and make informed deductions. Most items can be analysed by thinking about

- the physical features of the object
- how the item was constructed
- its condition
- its function
- its design.

The panel on page 85 shows how this could be applied to the candle snuffer. If children are unfamiliar with the examination of artefacts the teacher might use the questions to examine an object with the whole class. Later, copies of the questions might be given to groups as a reference and a trigger for discussion during the examination of any object.

Step 3 Drawing conclusions

Discussion and questioning should encourage children to think about what the object can tell us about the skills, technologies, art forms, work and leisure of the people who made and used it. For example, the candle snuffer was necessary for people at a time when candles were the main source of domestic light. While we use candles today, we do not use them so much that we would find a snuffer necessary.

The examination of other objects may help children to appreciate the work-load performed by domestic workers in the past and our own reliance on machines. The decoration on objects may also give us clues to the interests and beliefs of people: for example, mugs or plates may record commemorative events or the visits of people to certain places, while penal crosses may indicate the importance people attached to religious pilgrimages.

Some of these aspects may be discussed more fully by children when they have an opportunity to complete further investigations about the object and its period.

Step 4 Follow-up

Follow-up activities could include:

- engaging in further research to confirm the identity of the object, for example using books, oral evidence, or photographs
- investigating how other forms of lighting were developed
- in some cases, attempting to use the objects can help children to empathise with the life of people in the past, for example lifting a heavy clothes iron and comparing it with a modern one can bring home the labour involved before the introduction of the electric iron.



A candle snuffer

A framework for examining historical artefacts applied to a candle snuffer

Consider...	Ask questions such as...	Commentary
physical features	<p>What colour is it?</p> <p>What does it look like?</p> <p>...shape, size</p> <p>How does it feel?</p> <p>...texture, temperature, weight</p> <p>What does it sound like?</p> <p>...hollow, tinny, solid</p> <p>Can you see any inscriptions?</p>	<p>The candle snuffer is silver-coloured on the outside but blackened on the inside. This may suggest that it held something or that something 'dirty' was put in it.</p> <p>The holder feels strong and hard. It does not carry any inscriptions.</p>
construction	<p>Was it made in pieces?</p> <p>...or in one piece?</p> <p>Are there signs that it was made in a mould?</p> <p>What was it made of?</p> <p>...wood, metal, clay/pottery, plastic, fabric</p>	<p>Children should learn to categorise and identify common materials through sorting activities such as those suggested in the science programme. They can also be taught to recognise some common manufacturing techniques: for example, moulded objects will show a mould line, pottery made on a wheel will be regular and sometimes have lines visible, garments made from woven fabrics are quite distinct from those that are knitted.</p> <p>The candle snuffer shows signs of having been made in two pieces as the handle may have been added later.</p>
condition	<p>Has the object been changed or repaired in any way?</p> <p>Can you see any signs that it may have been damaged or worn?</p> <p>Is the object complete?</p>	<p>Signs of wear on objects may give some indication of how an object may have been held or used: for example, wood which has darkened may indicate where it has been held in the hand. The blackened interior of the snuffer suggests that it has been used in some way.</p>
function	<p>How might it have been used?</p> <p>...for what purpose?</p> <p>Who might have used it?</p> <p>Where might it have been used?</p>	<p>Handling the object might suggest how it could have been used: for example the snuffer will not sit on a level surface on its pointed end so it could not be used to hold liquids. Younger children might need to be given a candle, a candle holder and the snuffer at the same time for them to be able to establish its function.</p> <p>The colour or finish on some objects may suggest a domestic use, while very elaborate decoration may suggest that the object was purely for ornament or was made to be seen as well as used.</p> <p>The size of an object may indicate whether it was used by a man or a woman or a child.</p>
design	<p>Does it do the job it was designed for well?</p> <p>Were the materials suitable for the object?</p> <p>Is it beautiful?</p> <p>Does it feel right in your hand?</p> <p>Would it have been easy to use?</p>	<p>These are more difficult questions, but with practice, pupils might be encouraged to evaluate objects in this way. Metal has obvious advantages over other materials in the case of the snuffer, and children could be asked if the snuffer's handle and weight make it pleasant to use.</p>

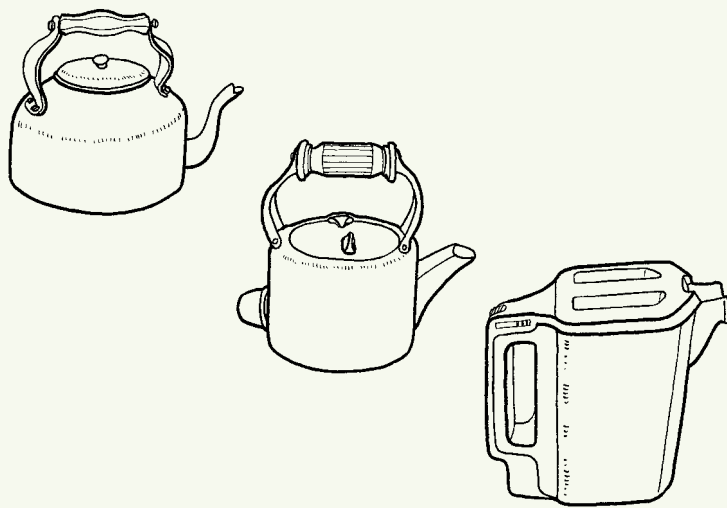
Exemplar 12

Activities and artefacts

Modern to old

first to sixth classes

Children can be asked to examine a modern object, for example an electric jug kettle, using the approach outlined in *Exemplar 11*. This work should direct their attention to the ways in which the design of a modern appliance is or is not suited to its use. A selection of old kettles could then be given to the group, for example an older electric kettle, a heavy kettle used on solid fuel ranges in the past, and a ‘black’ iron kettle with handle for hanging on a crook above an open fire.



Comparing modern and old items can help children’s understanding of change and continuity.

These could be examined in the same way, the children comparing the ways in which the kettles solve the same problem and use different technologies. The children can then be asked to place them in chronological order, giving reasons for the sequence chosen. For younger children the number of objects should be very limited – two or three at first – and clearly differentiated by age. As children become more proficient in the handling of objects, the range of objects can grow and the differences in age may become less obvious.

Many domestic appliances have their older equivalents and can be used in this way, for example washing machines/equipment and carpet cleaners. In each case an appreciation of the contemporary model will enhance the children’s understanding of its antecedents.

Objects and oral evidence

all classes

Asking someone who was familiar with objects to demonstrate how they were used can be an excellent way of using oral evidence and enhancing children’s understanding of the artefacts. In many rural areas, older people will still remember how milk was hand-churned to make butter, and the various items used – crocks for settling the milk, dash and drum churns, butter spades and pats, etc. – survive and may be seen in local museums. Craft workers may also be able to speak to children about their tools and jobs.

Lost luggage

all classes

This exercise challenges children to deduce as much information as possible from available evidence and can be adapted to all age groups. A case, jacket, wallet or handbag is presented to the children as lost property. The children have to establish facts about the owner from an examination of the contents.

For example, what could be discovered from these items in a man’s jacket?

car keys

a Bus Éireann ticket

a medicine bottle labelled ‘Mr J. O’Malley’

a map of the London underground

a spectacle case inscribed ‘B. Smith, Optician, Killarney’

letter beginning ‘Dear Dad’ and ending ‘Love from Mary’

wallet (containing photograph of a boy and two girls, telephone call card and piece of paper with ‘Sinéad London 674 3826’ on it, Irish and sterling money notes)

Through discussion, children should be brought to distinguish those facts that we know from suppositions or guesses and to identify how we might find out more using the ‘leads’ in the evidence.

Archaeology

third to sixth classes

As children learn about ancient societies they should be made aware of some of the ways in which archaeologists learn about the lives of these people. An opportunity may arise for children to see a ‘dig’ if remains are unearthed in the locality, and some exhibition centres show how the evidence collected by archaeologists is used to deduce information about people in the past.